

**Climate Coloniality and Obligations of States with Respect to Climate Change: Exploring  
the Relationship Between the British Dominion and Fijian Climate Vulnerability**

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## Introduction

Climate change is one of the greatest issues facing the globe today. The inequities of this phenomenon are laid bare in the Pacific islands, where atmospheric warming and consequent sea level rise are occurring at a rate far above average (Nicholls & Cazenave, 2010). The colonial legacies that exist in this region further exacerbate the vulnerabilities caused by intensified climate change (Fuentes-George, 2023). An inextricable link exists between colonialism, climate change, and climate preparedness: from the conquering of the Americas by Spanish and Portuguese colonizers (Lewis & Maslin, 2015) to the disruption of traditional knowledge dissemination inhibiting Indigenous understandings of environmental change (Chand et al., 2014), colonialism can be identified as one of the drivers behind both the causes and consequences of climate change. Scholars and bureaucrats in former colonies alike are recognizing this connection (Islam et al., 2024; Sultana, 2022) and have called upon the International Court of Justice to determine the obligation of states in relation to climate change (Lamm, 2024; Spijkers, 2023).

By analyzing the relationship between the British Dominion and the Fijian islands, it becomes evident that the British Empire has turned Fiji into a sacrifice zone and has consequently subjected it to an unstable future as a result of climate change. In light of the investigation of the obligations of states in relation to climate change, the case can be made that the British government can and should be held responsible for the consequences of sea level rise in Fiji. This research demonstrates the relationship between a place in the Overseas Dominion and the British Commonwealth by exploring the role that British colonialism has played in Fiji's vulnerability to climate change. A closer relationship between the two states should be established through the lens of climate reparations, in which the British Crown can provide

compensation to the Fijian government in recognition of its suppression of climate change mitigation and adaptation capacity due to historic colonial objectives.

### **Fiji and the British Dominion**

The regime of British colonialism permeated all hemispheres and continents (McIntyre, 1999). The Pacific Islands were no exception to the trend of conquering and land acquisition, and the legacy of British colonialism lives on in the region. The Islands of Fiji, now referred to as the Republic of Fiji, are a series of islands in the South Pacific that were originally colonized by Britain in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Banivanua-Mar, 2010). Prior to contact, Fijians, descendants of Micronesian explorers, existed on the island for 3000 years as a population with distinct cultural practices and languages (MacNaught, 2016). The word ‘Fijian’ will be used in this paper to refer to the Indigenous population that inhabited the Islands of Fiji prior to European contact<sup>1</sup>. After a period of informal occupation, Fijian territory was ceded to the British Crown in 1874 and Fiji officially became a colony. Historical records of the time indicate that Fijian Chiefs ceded their land with the full confidence that Queen Victoria would properly care for Fijians and that she would not allow British settlers on the island to dominate the Indigenous population. The reality of this annexation, however, was that the English settlers in Fiji envisioned a future of indentured servitude for Fijians (MacNaught, 2016).

Correspondence between the British Parliament and the merchants that had arrived in Fiji chronicles the colonial perception that Indigenous Fijians required civilization and the imposition of an alternative rule of law (Davie & McLean, 2017). At the same time, however, strict requirements for the conquering of Fiji to be as economically efficient as possible had been

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<sup>1</sup> While the term *Fijian* is used to describe the Indigenous population of Fiji in this paper, it must be acknowledged that other terms have been used to describe this group in the past. *Fijian* is consistent with the terminology used in the literature reviewed for this research. Further, conflicting accounts exist on other terminology, and so *Fijian* will remain the descriptor for this work in the interest of consistency.

handed down, and an expectation that Fiji could be financially independent from the Crown was conferred. The systems that were developed were far gentler than Britain's previous forays into cultural extermination; the British required genuine partnerships with the Fijians to reduce the resource intensity of this colonial endeavour and thus relied primarily on administrative measures to expunge traditional practices by governing the daily routines of Indigenous Fijians (MacNaught, 2016). The objective of this endeavour was to sow seeds of individualism that would internally disrupt Fijian ways of life that relied on community. This took the form of Provincial Inspectors that evaluated the efficiency and compliance of villages with new standards that had been imposed by British officials. Many such regulations related to sanitation in villages, which justified the burning of personal goods and the destruction of property, the existing practice of benevolence and favour-granting within communities, and the exploitation of communal labour structures in service of constructing British offices and other structures of interest. Finally, a native taxation scheme was implemented, which forced Fijians to seek work from British colonizers in order to pay the taxes that had been imposed on their mere existence (MacNaught, 2016). However the aspiration toward servitude that British colonizers had envisioned for Fijians never manifested, as Fijians were devoted to adapting British labour practices to meet their needs in as traditional a way as possible.

This (appropriate) rejection of colonial servitude led the British to inextricably link Fiji with one of its other colonies: India. Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Indian workers were forced to relocate to Fiji as indentured servants working in fields of sugar cane (Gaines, 2012). With a new labour force to bolster the British vision of economic output in Fiji, land was quickly expropriated from the Fijians and the most fertile soils were lost to the monocropping of sugar cane. A gross undermining of land rights and ownership deeds was

subsequently conducted (MacNaught, 2016). Existing deeds held by Fijians were cancelled by the local British government without notice to the owner, and hundreds of thousands of acres were secretly sold off this way to fuel the agricultural future of the islands. It was also written into law that the British were entitled to any land that was not immediately necessary to tribal villages, and British Governors were given unanimous decision-making authority over what constituted necessity. The land that was not lost became heavily polluted by the sudden influx of forced labourers and wasteful agricultural practices (MacNaught, 2016). Previously fruitful land became unyielding as a result. This piece of Fiji's history has remained a source of strife that has resulted in modern-day instability within the country (Schieder, 2012).

The final lever of colonialism employed in the British domination of Fiji was the settler control over the education system to disrupt the system of chieftaincies as a Fijian governance mechanism (White, 2006). The school system implemented under colonial rule was run by Christian missionaries to disseminate the English language and to create a colonially educated elite amongst Fijian chiefs. The exclusivity of such an education was capitalized on by the British to drive further individualism into Fijian villages. Passages from the bible were – unsurprisingly – one of the main sources of information provided in these schools, alongside 'behavioural' lessons that imparted Victorian gender norms and labour ideals onto students (White, 2006). Further, the speaking of Fijian languages was banned while school was in session. British habits were imposed through this strategy and British practices were gradually integrated into Fijian practices. High Chiefs were the primary target for elite education at finishing schools in Australia and New Zealand, which has removed public service from the duties of Chiefs and has produced animosity between Chiefs and untitled Fijians that persists today (White, 2006, 2015).

Fiji represents the final issuance of dominion status by the British Crown. Following World War II and the long-awaited push for decolonization, Britain had great difficulty identifying the appropriate avenue for decolonizing its Pacific territories (McIntyre, 1999). This produced an interest in such territories by the United Nations, which endorsed three primary means of decolonization: granting territories complete, sovereign independence, freely electing to remain associated with, but not directly governed by, a State, or freely electing to become fully integrated into the State enforcing colonial rule. British, Fijian, and Indian leaders alike recognized issues that may be associated with each of these possible futures (McIntyre, 1999). The British recognized that Fiji would likely fall into disarray if granted full independence, as Indigenous Fijians feared their voices would be overshadowed by Indian populations that outnumbered them at the time. To diffuse these tensions, the British implemented a legislative assembly that proportionately represented Fijians, Indians, and Europeans and a constitution was written. To pacify views that British stewardship of the islands would remain necessary while honouring the international advancement of decolonization, Britain granted Fiji Dominion Status at the same time that it was adopted into the commonwealth as an independent country (McIntyre, 1999). The role of Dominion, in this instance, served to facilitate sovereignty while honouring Crown relations. Fiji's independence marks the final evolution of the British Dominion and exemplifies the role that this status played in a modern context.

### **Climate Coloniality and the British Sacrifice of Fiji**

The drivers of climate change and, by proxy, sea level rise, represent an extreme injustice in the case of Fiji and many other small island States. The earliest indications of climate change can be traced back to the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, when Spanish and Portuguese explorers first landed in the New World, or what we know today as Latin America (Lewis & Maslin, 2015). These

regimes carried out the most brutal colonization that had been seen to date, and that may have ever been seen in the historical record. The decimation of Indigenous groups that Spanish and Portuguese colonists facilitated led to a noticeable decline in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels on planet earth. This phenomenon, known as the Orbis Hypothesis, can be seen as the point in time when atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels first began to rise and have since failed to stop (Lewis & Maslin, 2015). With the conquering of the Indigenous populations of the Americas came the insatiable extraction of raw materials in other resources that expedited the industrialization of colonial Europe. This abundance of resources allowed high-ranking social classes to consume goods at rates that they had never previously been able to.

It is through this history that climate change has become a fixture of the human experience over 500 years later. Systems of capitalism developed from this desire for rare resources and established a society rooted in consumerism. This desire to consume value-added products necessitated the rapid expansion of industrial facilities that required efficient fuel sources, satisfied by the discovery of fossil fuels such as peat, coal, and, centuries later, oil and gas (Patel & Moore, 2017). Maintaining such levels of resource wealth and manufacturing efficiency, however, relied on the complete domination of entire continents to maintain a consistent labour force and supply of resources (Patel & Moore, 2017). It is these conditions that have produced the climate reality that we are experiencing today. The fuel sources used to manufacture goods both preceding and following the Industrial Revolution produce carbon dioxide equivalent (CO<sub>2</sub>e) emissions that trap heat from solar radiation in the atmosphere at accelerated rates than would naturally occur. The Greenhouse Effect, as this phenomenon is known, is the driver of modern climate change (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, n.d.).

The concept of climate coloniality has begun to appear in academic work as a concept that illustrates the relationship between colonialism, the beginnings of climate change, and the heightened vulnerabilities to climate change that former colonies face (Islam et al., 2024). The theory of climate coloniality attempts to address this past while acknowledging the present repercussions of historic colonization. The enforcement of colonial regimes on Indigenous people has led to governance mechanisms that do not adequately reflect the needs of a given population, and these regimes have produced global norms that impede the adequate implementation of climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. This acknowledgement of colonialism as a catalyst for climate change also allows for the equitable fighting of climate change. Assigning proportional responsibility to global actors for their historic and present actions is critical to supporting severely disadvantaged former colonies and developing nations of the Global South (Islam et al., 2024). Farhana Sultana writes in her piece *The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality* that “[w]e are still colonized, but this time through climate change” – a succinct assessment of the concept at hand (Sultana, 2022, p. 2).

Sea level rise is one such atrocity that is tied to colonialism by being a product of climate change. Elevated atmospheric temperatures contribute to the melting of glaciers and ice sheets in the Arctic and Antarctic, thus increasing the volume of water in the ocean and causing it to rise (Nicholls & Cazenave, 2010). A secondary consequence of climate change is that as atmospheric temperatures rise, water molecules expand, thus occupying more space in the global ocean basin (Nicholls & Cazenave, 2010). Such an expansion is not universal – it varies across the ocean as a result of rates of warming, salinity, gravity, oceanic currents, and more. The western Pacific Ocean, for example, has been experiencing rates of sea level rise three times faster than the average rate for the globe as a result of these discrepancies. The predominant consequence of sea



level rise is the loss of coastal territory and the erosion of shorelines (Nicholls & Cazenave, 2010).

Fiji, like most other Pacific Island countries, is now facing unprecedented rates of sea level rise as a result of anthropogenic climate change (Martin et al., 2018; Martínez-Asensio et al., 2019; Shiiba et al., 2023). Rising sea levels threaten food security, reshape cultural relationships with the land, and destroy coral reefs, which protect against storm surges and nurture the abundance of biodiversity that Fiji is world-renowned for (Martin et al., 2018; Shiiba et al., 2023). The islands of Fiji are particularly vulnerable to the threat of sea level rise because many of them are low-lying and have unprotected shorelines (Shiiba et al., 2023). Sea level rise has been identified as one of the leading climate issues in Fiji as a result (World Bank Group, n.d.).

Viewing sea level rise as a direct consequence of colonialism creates a cruel irony in small island States that are still facing the social and political repercussions of their colonial pasts in addition to the loss of territory caused by that same history. This is where the principle of sacrifice zones can be used to explain the present-day harms of colonialism on small island states. Sacrifice zones were originally conceptualized in relation to industrialized extractivism and the irreversible destruction of land that is left in its wake (Juskus, 2023). The general understanding of these areas is that their degradation was for the greater good. In other words, these plots of land were sacrificed in the name of advancing capitalist societies. Though not named as such, sacrifice zones were also central to the theories that fueled colonialism: land that was not seen as being used to its fullest potential by colonists was expropriated and exploited to the benefit of settlers. This phenomenon was witnessed in the colonization of Fiji (MacNaught, 2016). Sea level rise can equally be seen as a sacrifice as it is also an irreparable loss of territory

that fundamentally changes and challenges societies in the area. With the connection between sea level rise and colonialism, it can be established that by colonizing Fiji, the British Empire, though admittedly unknowingly, condemned Fijians to a disastrous future and thereby sacrificed an entire nation in the name of conquest and appeasing the British crown.

An inextricable link exists between colonialism and one's ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Kemi Fuentes-George is quoted in his article *The Legacy of Colonialism on Contemporary Climate Governance* as saying that "systems of racialized, gendered, and classed power established under colonialism affect contemporary relationships between human society and the environment" (Fuentes-George, 2023, p. 91). Each of these power structures was implemented or exacerbated during British rule in Fiji, as has been established through the previous account of colonialism in the region. Further, the British focus on agriculture introduced a concept of land domination that never previously existed in Fijian culture, therefore establishing additional preconditions for modern climate change. The assimilation of Victorian ideals forced upon students in Fiji during the colonial period also produced a loss of traditional knowledge (Bachmann et al., 2018) that has made this former colony far more vulnerable to the phenomenon that colonialism assisted in creating.

Traditional knowledge is critical for implementing culturally relevant and effective climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies in the Pacific Islands (Chand et al., 2014; Nunn et al., 2024). The thousands of years of history in these regions have exposed ancestral groups of the Fijians to climatic events of great variety, thus equipping the descendants of these groups with the tools necessary to react to such changes. A communal living system was necessary amongst the communities of small islands, and Fiji in particular was known for its networks of aid throughout Micronesia when climate disasters struck (Nunn et al., 2024). The

traditional knowledge that has survived today is in a weakened state as a result of colonial projects that have sought to suppress Indigenous knowledge, such as that which was carried out in Fiji (Bachmann et al., 2018).

The governance institutions of colonial Pacific states are still relatively new in relation to those of the empires that colonized them (Anantharajah, 2019). This recent history of colonialism has produced limitations in Fiji's ability to access funding for climate adaptation projects as well as to autonomously finance adaptation projects. An underdeveloped skilled labour force and limited capital markets are both barriers to implementing climate mitigation and adaptation tactics (Anantharajah, 2019). This can be attributed to the colonial design of sugar cane and other export markets during Dominion times: Fiji's largest and most populated island, Viti Levu, was the economic centre of the colony, and the peripheral islands were seldom leveraged for capital (Britton, 1980). Concentrations of wealth during colonial times may also play a role in the difficulty of financing climate projects. The representatives of Fijians, Indians, and Europeans in domestic government were not standardized. Where Fijians were represented by hereditary chiefs, Europeans were represented by business coalitions (Britton, 1980). European interests further proliferated, and business coalitions were predisposed to securing advantageous bargaining positions for themselves. Established businesses in Fiji have colonial heritage, but it is Indigenous knowledge that is critical to the effective implementation of climate-positive projects (Nunn et al., 2024). This produces an incongruity between the financial capital that exists and the projects that require funding.

Incongruencies also exist with Fiji's dependence on international aid to secure funding for many of the adaptation and mitigation projects it requires. Aid is ill-targeted and often produces numerous publications on development regimes that all reach similar conclusions

without offering additional support for implementing the recommendations they provide (Anantharajah, 2019). In addition to being inefficient, repetitive work can perpetuate neo-colonial approaches to climate adaptation planning by controlling the agenda of Fijian development without reflecting local needs or consulting with local decision-makers. Evidence exists that former colonies are ensnared by reliance on foreign aid as an outcome of the allocation of wealth under colonial rule, as was demonstrated above (Chiba & Heinrich, 2019). This produces both a lack of autonomy and an ineffective cocktail of projects that fail to meet the needs of Fijian climate issues. It is with this in mind that the argument for British climate reparations in Fiji can be made in light of the International Court of Justice case on equitable responsibility.

### **Obligation of States with Respect to Climate Change**

The discussion of obligations, accountability, and reparations are not new in the climate space however, they have been treated with increasing importance by international bodies such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Pattberg et al., 2022). An example of this pursuit of equity is the newly established Loss and Damage fund to support developing countries. The discussion of loss and damages has been critical to overcoming climate coloniality and broaching the fulfillment of climate justice. One of the first recognitions of the unequal contributions to and consequences of climate change is that of common but differentiated responsibility, a principle stating that, while all States contribute to climate change, it is to an unequal degree that they can be held accountable (Huber & Murray, 2024). For example, Fiji does not contribute nearly as much CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions to the atmosphere as Britain, and as such should not be expected to contribute to the mitigation of climate change with the same intensity. In the last five years, there has been a renewed interest from the Global

South to implement policies reflecting this discrepancy (Huber & Murray, 2024). As such, a Loss and Damage fund was negotiated under the UNFCCC over several years before it was established at the 27<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties meeting of 2022 (Waggy & Sharma, 2024).

The adoption of Loss and Damage funds under a mainstream international body has been a monumental success that has continued to motivate climate action from small island States (UNFCCC, n.d.-a). The pursuit of justice at the international level has not slowed, and the responsibilities of States under global climate agreements are now being investigated through the International Court of Justice (Lamm, 2024). This Court serves to settle disputes between States and provide advisory opinions to the United Nations General Assembly (International Court of Justice, n.d.), as is the case with *Obligations of States with respect to Climate Change*, an advisory opinion triggered by Vanuatu and supported by all Small Island Developing States (SIDS) (Spijkers, 2023). The advisory opinion – though non-binding upon its conclusion – will set an international precedent that establishes the legal obligations under the Paris Agreement, an international climate agreement that guides the effort to prevent 2°C of atmospheric warming (UNFCCC, n.d.-b). The Paris Agreement *is* legally binding, and the argument has been presented that failing to fulfill this agreement constitutes a violation of the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment that is recognized by the UN General Assembly (Spijkers, 2023).

Under the *Obligations of States with respect to Climate Change case*, the central questions of the case are presented by Spijkers (2023, pp. 13–14) as follows:

“a) What are the obligations of States under international law to ensure the protection of the climate system and other parts of the environment from anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases for States and for present and future generations;

b) What are the legal consequences under these obligations for States where they, by their acts and omissions, have caused significant harm to the climate system and other parts of the environment, with respect to:

- i. States, including, in particular, small island developing States, which, due to their geographical circumstances and level of development, are injured or specially affected by or are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change?
- ii. Peoples and individuals of the present and future generations affected by the adverse effects of climate change?”

The second question in particular has the potential to implicate colonial legacies in its consideration of “acts and omissions”. In the case of Britain, the impending ruling may set a precedent for the former colonial power to be held accountable for the climatic issues it has caused in addition to the social dynamics it orchestrated that have been linked to induced climate vulnerability. Scholars posit that both historic and ongoing CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions constitute a violation of the Principle of Prevention that is enshrined under international law (Mason-Chase & Dehm, 2021). This Principle requires that States take the steps necessary to prevent significant harm to extra-jurisdictional environments. This has been upheld several times by the International Court of Justice and could serve as a precedent in the advisory opinion they provide regarding *Obligations of States*. Due diligence is another principle of transboundary environmental harm that the Court has enforced. These considerations would consequently find Britain responsible for the sacrifice of Fiji as a result of colonial activity on the islands. As a developed nation, it can thus be accountable for providing climate-based reparations (Mason-Chase & Dehm, 2021).

It is with this framework in mind that a similar fund should be established by Britain for its former Small Island colonies. As has been established in this research, there are significant barriers that small island States face when accessing climate funds, often due to restricted institutional capacity and the incompatibility between funding restrictions and necessary projects. Considerable evidence exists that this is an appropriate avenue for compensatory justice, provided that such funds are not beholden to the whims of international capital markets (Leal Filho et al., 2022). Such a fund would be particularly important for Fiji, which is estimated to have incurred USD 119.48 Billion in Loss and Damage costs as a result of climate change (Kling et al., 2018, in Leal Filho et al., 2022). It is also necessary that Fiji is well-financed for climate adaptation, as it has made land sales to countries like Kiribati (another former British colony) that are seen by I-Kiribati as an option for relocation should their current home be completely submerged as is predicted by scientific modelling (Hermann & Kempf, 2017).

This is an example of South-South cooperation, a strategy that has also been highly advocated by scholars to avoid neo-colonialism through climate aid (Malherbe & Oladejo, 2024). While these cooperations are undoubtedly important for supporting the relevance of climate aid and for uplifting the voices of actors in the Global South, holding colonial powers accountable for their actors is an avenue for justice that must be fully considered. For example, while it is perfectly logical that displaced I-Kiribati would prefer settlement in a culturally and geographically similar place to their homeland, responsibility for this mass migration and forced statelessness should be ascribed to the United Kingdom as the colonial power that sacrificed each of these States. Financial support should thus be bestowed upon Fiji to assist with resettlement and to continue to fight against climate change.

A compromise between the current colonial regimes of Loss and Damage funding and South-South cooperation would be the establishment of a Loss and Damage fund by Great Britain that is governed and administered by Fiji. Administrative capacity building would first have to be established in Fiji to ensure that such a proposal is not burdensome to the State (Leal Filho et al., 2022). Allowing Fiji to serve as the conductor of this reparations scheme would overcome the trend of conditional international aid and would relieve the burden of taking on loans from international monetary services. Funds could be disbursed to projects that are a genuine reflection of the country's needs while building the capacity to establish greater South-South partnerships that facilitates an even more prosperous foray into regionalism. Further, solidarity is a necessary component for such a fund (Leal Filho et al., 2022). Loss and Damage funds from colonizer to former colonies cannot be founded in pity – they must be founded in ownership of the harms that have been perpetuated into the present day in order to serve their true purpose.

## **Conclusion**

British colonialism is responsible for fundamentally changing life in Fiji. Actions from over 150 years ago have now manifested as a reduced capacity to fight the most pressing issue of the modern day: climate change. It is the same actions that require Britain to be held responsible for the damages being inflicted upon Fijian landscapes, livelihoods, and lifestyles as a consequence of climate change. The establishment of a Loss and Damage fund between the United Kingdom and the Fijian islands is a necessary element of colonial reparations which acknowledges that, while historical injustices cannot be reversed, modern-day injustices can be addressed. Loss and damage funds in favour of former colonies, administered by those former colonies, have substantial support for counteracting climate coloniality and beginning a long



overdue process of reconciliation (Huber & Murray, 2024; Waggy & Sharma, 2024). Fiji is independent—but it is not free from the consequences of its past. British reparations are one step in the direction of acknowledging this fact and supplementing the climate change mitigation and adaptation support that Fiji has been unable to provide for itself as a result of its colonial past.

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